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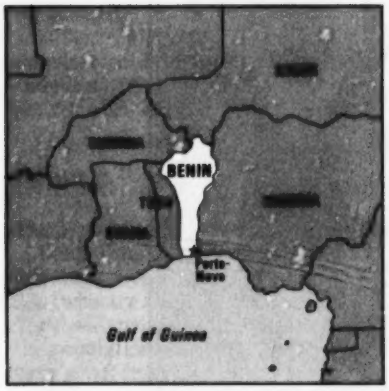
Benin

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs

March 1989



Official Name:
The People's Republic of Benin

PROFILE

Geography

Area: 112, 622 sq. km. (43,483 sq. mi.); slightly smaller than Pennsylvania. **Cities:** *Nominal capital*—Porto Novo (pop. 130,000). *Political and economic capital*—Cotonou (pop. 330,000). **Terrain:** Generally flat. **Climate:** Tropical.

People

Nationality: *Noun and adjective*—Beninese (sing. and pl.). **Population** (1988): 4 million. **Annual growth rate** (1988): 3.6% (1980–85). **Ethnic groups:** Fon, Adja, Bariba, Yoruba, others. **Religions:** 65% traditional, 17% Christian, 12% Muslim. **Language:** French (official). **Education:** *Years compulsory*—6. *Primary school enrollment* (1983 est.)—67%. *Adult literacy*—11%. **Health:** *Infant mortality rate*—116/1000. *Life expectancy*—49 yrs. **Work force** (1987 est.): 1.9 million, 72% engaged in agriculture.

Government

Type: Nominally Marxist-Leninist. **Independence:** August 1, 1960. **Constitution:** Adopted 1977.

Branches: *Executive*—President and National Executive Council (Cabinet). *Legislative*—National Revolutionary Assembly. *Judicial*—People's Central Court, prosecutor general, lower tribunals.

Political party: People's Revolutionary Party. **Suffrage:** Universal.

Administrative subdivisions: 6 provinces, 84 districts.

Central government operating budget (1987): about $159.4 million; education 28.9%; defense: 21.6% of government budget.

Flag: Green with a red star at top left.

Economy

GDP (1987 prelim., current prices): $1,497 million. **Annual growth rate** (1986–87): 7.1% (−2.1% at constant 1980 prices). **Per capita income** (1987, current prices): $374.

Natural resources: Small offshore oil deposits; no other known minerals in commercial quantity (other than unexploited deposits of high-quality marble).

Agriculture (44.9% of GDP, 1987 prelim.): *Products*—cotton, oil palm products, groundnuts, food subsistence crops (cassava, yams, maize, beans, sorghum).

Industry (13.8% of GDP, 1987 prelim.): *Types*—crude oil production, food processing, textiles, beverages, construction materials, steel reinforcing rods.

Services: 33.1% of GDP, 1987 prelim.

Trade (1986 prelim.): *Exports*—$181.1 million: cotton, cement, palm oil products, cocoa, karite nut butter, and sea products. Estimate does not include value of 500,000 metric tons of petroleum exported. *Major markets*—Holland, France, other EC countries, Nigeria. *Imports*—$369.8 million: hydrocarbon products, construction materials, and consumer goods for re-export. *Major suppliers*—France, other EC countries, China, Japan, US ($16.9 million).

Official exchange rate: Floating; tied to French franc, 50 CFA francs = 1 French franc.

Economic aid received (1986): *Total*—$79 million (grants and loans). *US aid*—$71 million (loans and grants) since 1953; $3.1 million in 1987.

Membership in International Organizations

UN and some of its specialized and related agencies; Organization of African Unity (OAU); African, Malagasy, and Mauritanian Common Organization (OCAM); Entente Council; West African Monetary Union; Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS); Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); Communaute Economique de l'Afrique de l' Ouest (CEAO), INTELSAT.

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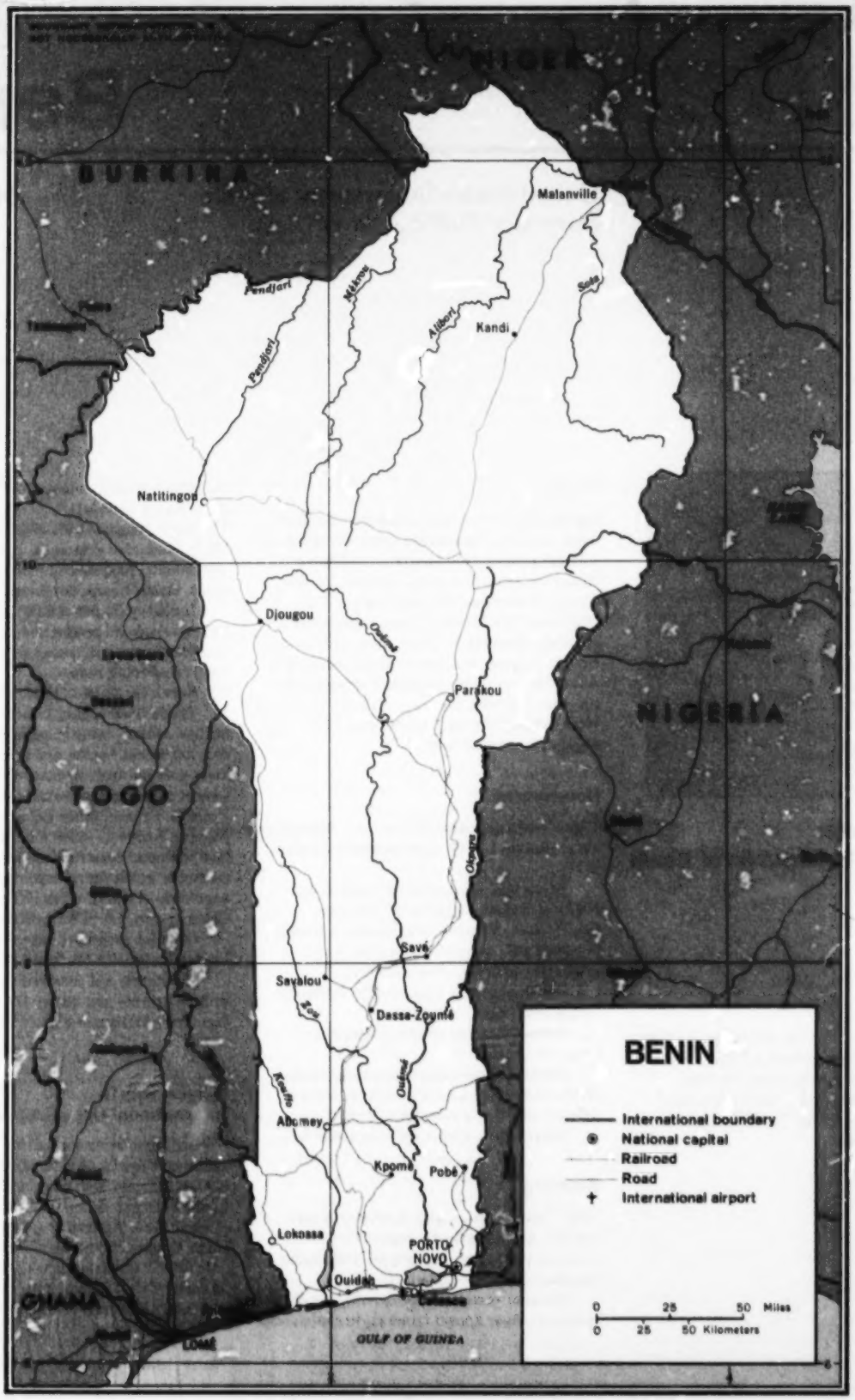
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Cotonou
GHANA
GULF OF GUINEA
BENIN
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National capital
Railroad
Road
International airport
0 25 50 Miles
0 25 50 Kilometers

GEOGRAPHY

Located on the south side of the West Africa bulge, Benin is bounded by Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, and a 120-kilometer (75-mi.) coastline along the Gulf of Guinea. North of the coastal lagoons, the country is mostly flat and covered with dense vegetation. Although tempered by a sea breeze, the climate of the coastal region is hot and humid most of the year. Rainfall of 76–127 centimeters (30–50 in.) per year gradually diminishes toward the north until the climate and topography become Sahelian along the Niger River boundary with Niger. The south has two rainy seasons (April–July and October–November); the north has one (June–October).

While for historical and political reasons Porto Novo remains the nominal capital, the actual political and economic capital is Cotonou, where the presidency, National Revolutionary Assembly, most ministries, all embassies, and most of the country's commercial activites are located.

PEOPLE

The population of the People's Republic of Benin comprises about 20 sociocultural groups. Four groups—the Fon, Aja (who are related), Bariba, and Yoruba—account for more than half of the population. Europeans constitute a very small fraction of the population, with French the most numerous. About 80% of the population is rural; 49% of the population is 15 years old or younger. Benin is not linguistically homogeneous. French is the official language, although it is spoken more in urban than rural areas.

HISTORY

In the precolonial era, Benin was a collection of small, often warring principalities, the most powerful of which was the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey (with its capital at Abomey), founded in the 17th century. In the 17th and 18th centuries, first the Portuguese and later other European powers established trading posts along the coast, notably at Porto Novo and Ouidah. They traded firearms and luxury items to the kings of Dahomey and other principalities for slaves, who were mostly prisoners taken in internecine wars. Thousands of slaves were shipped to the New World, primarily to Brazil and the Caribbean. This part of West Africa became known in the 18th and 19th centuries as the Slave Coast. Northern Benin traded primarily with other Africans and Arabs in the Sahel region and thus experienced limited European influence.

France led efforts to suppress the slave trade, beginning in the mid-19th century. These efforts, along with expansion into Africa by European colonial empires, led to alliances with some local groups and warfare with others. In 1892, the King of Dahomey was subjugated and the country organized as the French protectorate of Dahomey. Dahomey, in turn, became a territory of French West Africa, and it remained a French colony until independence in 1960, when it was called the Republic of Dahomey. The name was changed to the People's Republic of Benin in 1975.

In the early years of independence, the nation was plagued by political instability, including many coups and changes of government (nine in the first 12 years of independence). The last change took place on October 26, 1972, when a group of middle- and junior-grade officers seized control of the government. A military revolutionary government was established, with a Cabinet composed primarily of military officers. Then-Maj. Mathieu Kerekou was named chief of state, a position he has held since that time.

The Kerekou government, with the support of Benin's Marxist intellectuals, many of them French educated, soon began a process of revolutionary change, attempting to restructure the government, the economy, and the society along Marxist-Leninist lines. Close political ties were established with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Strained diplomatic relations prompted the United States to withdraw its ambassador to Benin in February 1976; although the United States continued to be represented in Cotonou by a charge d'affaires. Large private businesses were nationalized; a single political party was created; and institutions were established for the centralized direction of political and economic activity. Nevertheless, the thousands of small private commercial enterprises that are the lifeblood of Benin's economy, continued to operate. Although some large-scale government agricultural projects were initiated, agriculture also is predominantly in the hands of individuals.

In 1977, a group of mercenaries landed at the Cotonou airport to carry out a coup d'etat. They were quickly repulsed after some minor fighting. Although the attempt may have been initiated by Beninese exile groups, the Government of Benin blamed "international imperialism." Relations with the West, including France and the United States, deteriorated markedly. Assistance provided by Libya in the wake of the attack encouraged closer Beninese-Libyan ties.

The government adopted a new constitution in 1977 to further institutionalize the revolution. Elections to the first National Revolutionary assembly were held in November 1979, and the assembly then elected Mathieu Kerekou president of the country in 1980. In August 1984, he was re-elected. Despite real and alleged plots against his government in 1973, 1975, and 1977, violence and demonstrations in 1978 and 1981, and preempted coup plots in 1988, Kerekou's 16 years of rule have been more stable than the politically turbulent 1960–72 period.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS

In 1974, 2 years after Kerekou came into power, Marxism-Leninism was declared the guiding philosophy of the new government. A single party, the People's Revolutionary Party, was established and modeled after those in communist countries. The party and its Central Committee play a primary role in government decisionmaking. The Central Committee makes all appointments to important positions and promulgates important government decisions.

Recently, President Kerekou has modified his government's attempts to apply strict Marxism-Leninism. Driven by heavy losses suffered by nationalized industries and the worsening economic situation, the government has shown an interest in privatizing many government-controlled sectors of the economy. In early 1986, Benin allowed a number of private foreign firms to begin operation in the transport sector.

Although no opposition parties are permitted, the people do have a voice in the political life of the country. Each elected level, starting at the village, chooses the next level of leadership. This process applies to the National Revolutionary Assembly, which, in turn, elects the president. While the party must approve all candidates, consideration is given to the selection of local leaders acceptable to their local communities. The process of elections to the Second National Revolutionary Assembly began in April 1984 and ended with the election of a new assembly in July 1984.

On July 29, 1988, the Cabinet was restructured. Cabinet ministers along with the six "prefets" (provincial governors), make up the National Executive

Council. According to the constitution, the Council is the supreme administrative and executive organ of the country. In practice much of the work is done by the Permanent Committee of the Council.

Principal Government Officials

President, Chairman of the People's Revolutionary Party, Minister of Defense—General Mathieu Kerekou

Ministers
Foreign Affairs and Cooperation—Guy Landry Hazoume
Finance—Didier Dassi
Industry and Energy—Justin Gnidehou
Interior and Public Security—Edouard Zodehougan
Planning and Statistics—Simon Ifede Ogouma
Director General of the Ministry of Defense—Colonel Aristide Boni

Ambassador to the United States—Theophile Nata

Benin maintains an embassy at 2737 Cathedral Avenue NW., Washington, D.C. 20008 (tel. 202-232-6656).

ECONOMY

The economy of Benin, heavily dependent upon regional trade and the export of cotton and crude oil, has been severely affected by ineffective government policies, regional recession, the collapse of world commodity prices, heavy external debt, balance-of-payment deficits, and very low foreign exchange reserves and liquidity. Since 1985, the government has made considerable progress but, by November 1988, had still not reached an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on economic reforms or a standby agreement that would pave the way for rescheduling Benin's external debt and the mobilization of new development resources.

The majority of Benin's population (about 80%) is engaged in subsistence agriculture. Benin, unlike many African states, is largely self-sufficient in food. The agricultural sector, however, has suffered from drought, poor infrastructure, insufficient and inefficient use of fertilizer and insecticides, and low producer prices. In addition to subsistence food crops (corn, sorghum, yams, cassava, beans, rice), Benin produces cash crops, including palm oil products, cotton, and peanuts. Recently, the government has encouraged cotton production through price supports and subsidies on fertilizers and insecticides. Cotton sales now represent a significant portion of Benin's agricultural exports (31% in 1987) even though the world price of cotton has dropped sharply since 1985. Although cotton exports have increased since 1985, the government can no longer afford its expensive cotton subsidy program and has begun to phase it out.

Benin's industrial sector produces textiles, beverages, processed food, and construction materials and is dominated by public enterprises. In 1982, in response to severe financial and economic problems, the government initiated steps to dissolve, merge, or reform many of its inefficient parastatals. Three major projects—the Onigbolo cement plant, the Save sugar refinery, and the Seme oil field—have proved disappointing. Although the government-controlled Seme field produces approximately 5,500 barrels of crude oil per day, oil revenue is low due to high lifting costs, shortages of technical and managerial personnel, and low oil prices. Ashland Oil, however, took over Seme operations in June 1988 and will carry out the planned "Phase II" expansion of the field that is expected to increase production and lower production costs. The inauguration of the joint Benin-Togo Nangbeto Hydroelectric Power Project, in May 1988, should meet 30% of Benin's electricity requirements and has reduced its need to import electricity from Ghana.

Further Information

These titles are provided as a general indication of material published on this country. The Department of State does not endorse unofficial publications.

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Available from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402:

U.S. Department of State. *Benin Post Report.* February 1984.

Benin has no refinery and imports petroleum products both for domestic consumption and for re-export. Traditionally, Benin's major source of export earnings has been re-exports to neighboring countries. The closure of the Nigerian border in April 1984 contributed to Benin's financial difficulties, since customs duties are the largest single source of government revenues. Although the border reopened in March 1986, the regional downturn in recorded trade persists. Nevertheless, customs duties continue to supply nearly half of government receipts. Informal imports, exports, and re-exports are considerable but difficult to document.

The government's 5-year plan (1983–88) emphasized the development of agriculture. The government wants to assure its own domestic needs, and to become a supplier of basic foodstuffs to the region. Recent government actions have reinforced the trend toward the privatization of government enterprises. Changes have been made in the investment laws to attract external investment to Benin.

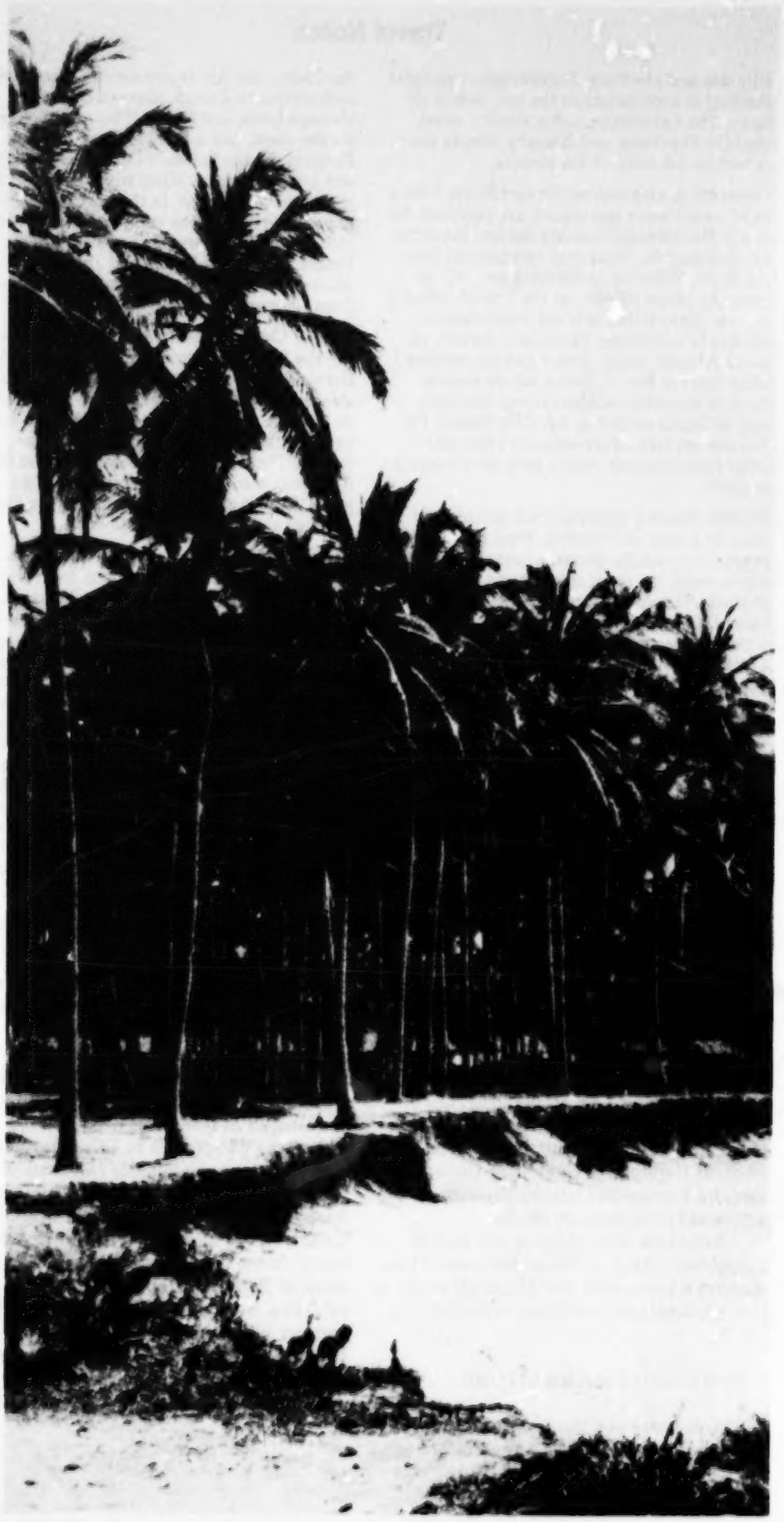
DEFENSE

Benin's Armed Forces number about 3,200 personnel (1985 estimate). In addition to the regular army, there is a small navy (100), air force (160), and militia. The president also retains a sizable and well-armed Presidential Guard Battalion (about 750). Equipment, supplies, and training have come from the Soviet Union, France, Libya, and Algeria.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Benin is a member of the Nonaligned Movement and the Organization of African Unity. In the United Nations its voting pattern is similar to those of other nonaligned nations. The People's Revolutionary Party maintains links with its counterparts in Cuba, North Korea, the Soviet Union, and Libya, although relations with Libya cooled in 1988. The United States, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Ghana, Zaire, Egypt, China, Algeria, Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Cuba, North Korea, Libya, and Western Sahara (Polisario) maintain resident embassies in Cotonou.

Relations with France are important because of historical, cultural, economic, and aid links. In the period after the revolution, and particularly since 1977, these relations were strained. Many French citizens were expelled



La Crique is near Cotonou

Travel Notes

Climate and clothing: Lightweight, washable clothing is appropriate in the hot, humid climate. The *harmattan*, a dust-ladden wind, blows in December and January. Shorts are generally not worn on the streets.

Customs: A visa and health certificate with a valid yellow fever inoculation are required for entry. Health requirements change; check latest information. Visas may be obtained from the Benin Embassy in Washington, DC, or from the Benin Mission to the United Nations in New York. Benin will not issue visas in passports containing Taiwanese, Israeli, or South African visas. Exit visas are required after stays in Benin. Benin has no restrictions on importation of currency, but there may be limits on taking out CFA francs. For full and current information on visas and other requirements, check with the Embassy of Benin.

Health: Water is generally not potable and must be boiled and filtered. Food must be prepared carefully. Malaria, including strains which resist the usual chloroquine prophylaxis, is endemic, and hepatitis is a hazard. Cotonou is latitude 6 north of the Equator; precaution against sun exposure is advised to avoid sunstroke and heat exhaustion. Limited quantities of French patent medicine are available.

Telecommunications: Telephone service from Cotonou is good but expensive. Cotonou is 6 hours ahead of eastern standard time.

Transportation: International air service to Benin is via Abidjan, Paris, and Brussels. UTA, Air Afrique, Sabena, Nigerian Airlines, Ghana Airways, Aeroflot, Air Burkina, Air Zaire, and Air Ivoire serve Cotonou. Air connections to Europe also can be made through Lome and Lagos. Two rail lines service the coast, and a third extends north to Parakou. Roads between Cotonou and Lagos and Lome are good. Many roads in Benin are in poor condition and, in the north, are often impassable during the rainy season. Spare parts and repair services are available for French cars. Both Honda and Toyota have dealerships in Cotonou, but models may differ from US models.

Hotels: Cotonou has an international class hotel, the Benin Sheraton, opened in 1982. The Hotel Aledjo, run by the French-PLM chain, also is first class. Less expensive is the Hotel de la Plage. In the north, the PLM runs an excellent hotel in Natitingou—the Tata-Somba. There is a good hotel in Parakou (Les Routiers). For trips to the Pendjari game park, there is a small (21-room) hotel in Porga. Abomey also has an adequate hotel.

Tourist attractions: Pendjari, a game reserve in northern Benin, is open from November to May. There are antelope, elephants, hippopotami, caymans, lions, cheetahs, baboons, and birds. A museum in Abomey, located in the old Royal Palace, is devoted to the Kingdom of Dahomey. In Ouidah, a museum has been established in the former Portuguese fort. Exhibits focus on the slave trade and Benin's links with Brazil and the Caribbean. The museum in Porto Novo has a small but good collection of traditional masks and statues. Another well-publicized tourist attraction is the village of Ganvie, one of the fishing villages built on stilts in the middle of a lagoon. One can visit Ganvie by motor-canoe run by the National Tourist Organization.

from Benin and their properties expropriated. Since 1981, and following the visit of President Francois Mitterrand in January 1983, relations with France have improved. The French Government and Embassy sponsor an active program of exchanges with Benin, including French naval ship visits and cultural events. The Federal Republic of Germany, Canada, and the European Community also have active aid programs in Benin.

Relations with Nigeria are particularly important to Benin because of the country's proximity and Nigeria's relative economic and military strength.

U.S.-BENINESE RELATIONS

Relations between the United States and Benin were cordial in the years after independence, and the United States was an important bilateral aid donor, as well as a major contributor to the international financial institutions assisting the country. After 1972, however, relations became strained as Benin moved to strengthen its ties with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries and mounted harsh propaganda attacks on the United States. The U.S. Ambassador was withdrawn in 1976. Despite official tensions, diplomatic relations were never broken. The Embassy remained open, and the Peace Corps maintained its activities, although with fewer volunteers. Since the early 1980s, the Government of Benin has moved to improve relations with the United States. In November 1983, the United States appointed its first ambassador to Benin since 1976.

Although Benin's relations with Libya recently facilitated Libyan meddling in the region and prompted U.S. concerns, moves toward improved U.S.-Benin cooperation have continued. The U.S. Agency for International Development has a $6.5-million water and sanitation project in Zou Province and provides PL 480 food commodities. The Peace Corps maintains about 60 volunteers in the country.

There is no significant private U.S. investment in Benin currently, although a number of firms are actively exploring investment opportunities. U.S. exports to Benin totaled $16.9 million in 1986 and consisted mainly of tobacco, food, used clothing, and construction equipment. The Government of Benin adopted a more liberal investment code in 1982 in order to attract foreign investment; further modification of the code is anticipated. However, Benin's difficult economic situation and its traditional trading links, particularly with France and other European Community countries, may limit opportunities for U.S. exporters and investors.

About 250 U.S. citizens live in Benin, including embassy staff, missionaries, employees of international organizations, and their families.

Principal U.S. Officials

Ambassador—Walter E. Stadtler
Administrative Officer—James Webb
Consul—Mike Dane
Economic Officer—Michele Sison
Public Affairs Officer and Director of Cultural Center—Thomas Gradisher
Agency for International Development (AID) Affairs Officer—Mark Wentling (resident in Lome)
Peace Corps Director—Jean Demarteau

The U.S. Embassy in Benin is located at Rue Caporal Anani Bernard, Cotonou (tel. 30-06-50). The mailing address is Ambassade Americaine, B. P. 2012, Cotonou, Benin. ■

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